

## Status is ... for Manhattan Parents; A Kid Who Curls Up With the Classics

By CATHLEEN SCHINE NOV. 15, 1998

A few months ago, I traveled from Manhattan to Mantova, a small city in northern Italy, where I gave a talk alongside other novelists at a literary festival. At the last minute, my husband couldn't come, and I took my 11-year-old son, Tommy, instead. Tommy is always an asset, except for those rare moments when he isn't, and he is an excellent traveling companion, except for those rare moments when he isn't. So I looked forward to showing off my charming American child -- complete with copies of Mad magazine and Electronic Gaming Monthly, Adam Sandler CD's and "South Park" T-shirts -- to the Italians.

But something unexpected happened, something I never could have predicted, but something that I would like to prolong, to repeat over and over; something that bestowed upon my grateful shoulders a mantle of maternal status so magnificent, so rich and textured, its copious folds so comforting and at the same time so perfectly becoming that I have been dragging that mantle around like a ratty old security blanket ever since.

This is what happened: Tommy read "1984." He read it everywhere. He read it at breakfast, at lunch, at dinner, at every meeting with every editor, publisher and writer.

"What are you reading, Tommy?" someone would say. "Oh! '1984!' I did my thesis on that. And the Russian book that inspired it." Or: "What's that book you are reading, Tommy? Ah! Orwell. Bravo, Tommy!"

Tommy started reading "1984" at a friend's house. (He liked the first sentence: "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.") Naturally, when this information was imparted to me, I grabbed his hand and headed for a bookstore, bought him his own nice new copy and, in my benevolence, a new "Star

Wars" book, which he also took to Mantova. But just as he wanted to wear his blazer, polo shirt and khaki pants the minute we arrived on Italian soil, so, too, did he want to read not "Star Wars" but "1984." It was his mood, a grown-up mood. And he read "1984" for pleasure, it is true -- he genuinely loved the book. But his choice was also a conscious, generous gesture, I think. Tommy had found a sure-fire way to bestow upon me the gift of that elusive creature, as shy as a woodlands animal: status. Real status. Not money status or class status or success status, but the status of superior taste -- and not one's own superior taste, which is of course vulgar even to acknowledge, but the superior taste of one's child. Status pure and innocent, not sought after, but simply there, undeniable, stuffed casually in a pocket with some Magic cards.

Tommy has long finished reading "1984." But because I was so moved by this experience, I have tried to hold on to it. Only fate, whimsical at best, can bestow this kind of pure status on us. But it is the human condition to rail against fate, to try to influence, guide and hoodwink it.

To accord any status at all on parents, the book in question must be discovered by the child, must be freely chosen, like a religious vocation. I would therefore like to propose to publishers a new line of classics, along the lines of the Library of America. But instead of the elegant uniform black covers of those volumes, the dust jackets of this series would have a more contemporary, youthful quality: "Mrs. Dalloway" with a picture of a woman with bloodshot eyeballs popping out of her head, hanging from springs, for example. Or on the cover of "Middlemarch," simple and sleek, a Zippo lighter.

Imagine having a friend spy your child, sitting on a subway -- his fingers stained Cheeto orange -- gripping a copy of "Pnin." It would be so lovely for parents to hear: "I saw Mariah on the way home from school. I've always wanted to read 'Tristram Shandy' myself!" That is, instead of: "I saw Lauren hanging out with her friends on the street. You allow her to smoke?"

I suppose Manhattan parents like me leave "The Golden Bowl" suggestively propped up by our kid's breakfast cereal in the hope that the child, wearing the usual headphones blaring rap music, would appear at that night's dinner party with late James under one arm.

But let's face it, all these machinations are meaningless. Unless a child stumbles on a book by accident and embraces it completely independently, we get bupkis in

the status department. We're just striving, pushy, insecure, overbearing parents whose kids will probably have nervous breakdowns freshman year at Harvard and drop out to become aromatherapists.

So I have had my day in the status sun and must simply trust that some morning that sun will rise again for me. After all, children have an inherent decency and sense of fair play. They genuinely enjoy throwing us a bone now and then. Maybe there will be a literary festival in France. Maybe just before we leave, Tommy will develop an intense interest in the works of Jim Thompson and Paul Auster, the noir and neo-noir favorites of intellectual Paris. You never know. Cathleen Schine

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